

the *escapist*

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with
Chris Crawford

by Max Steele

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by Julianne Greer

I have a secret. You know all the times I've mentioned my NES? Well, it's not because I'm some minimalist, older is inherently better, classic-game-o-phile.

The truth of it is, I "stepped away from gaming" for a few years. Between the lack of desire to shell out another few hundred dollars for a SNES by my parents (and me, as I didn't have that kind of cash) and my difficult workload in high school and the university, I just didn't have the access or time.

Sure, I took my NES to my dorm room, and was quite popular for it, but that didn't exactly keep me up-to-date. I also played the occasional game on the computer, but upon discovering that it took my Sim approximately one hour to walk from the kitchen to the bathroom, yelling and grumbling at me the entire way about needing to relieve herself, I was done. I had enough stress in my life without having to worry about a slow-moving videogame toon.

And then, access was restored. I found myself in a relationship with someone

who also enjoyed videogames. Upon hitting this critical mass of two previously-avid-gamers, each lacking a gaming console, we decided we should procure a Playstation 2. Excited to get back into a pastime I looked back on with fondness, I researched titles, talked to Electronics Boutique clerks and found a game I was pretty sure I would like. I was set.

Then a strange thing happened.

I looked at the controller. Whatever happened to the two buttons and Directional-pad that controlled 95% of the game? There were now four buttons where there were once two. There were little joystick-thingies **and** a D-pad. Plus, there were these weird trigger-like "shoulder buttons" or some such.

Overwhelmed, I turned the controller over to my then-boyfriend and said, "I'll watch. You control. I have no idea what all that's for." We played the game. It was fun. But when we broke up a year or so later, I let him keep the Playstation 2.

Since then, I have plunged back into the gaming pool, owning my very own Playstation 2 and playing the occasional Xbox and PC game. But how many others out there stuck a toe into the pool and came away, never to return?

Gamers and designers alike have felt disenfranchised in one way or another by the unforgiving march of Time. And that is what this issue of *The Escapist* is about. Max Steele returns to tell of a recent conversation with gaming great Chris Crawford. Spanner takes us on a trip down memory lane, to a back alley arcade. Joe Blancato gives insight to the believer and fanatic found in all gamers, no matter how they might hide this under a hard, cynical exterior. Join us for another week's issue of *The Escapist*.

Cheers,



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

To the Editor: There appears to be a mistake in the article "Don't Ever Take Sides Against The Corps Again" (Issue #10), by Mark Wallace. Mr. Wallace interprets a study by PlayOn as finding that in *WoW*, players that belong to guilds level faster on average than players who don't. Looking at this study, it appears that the results are quite the opposite. In the chapter "Guild Affiliation and Leveling Time", PlayOn claims: "...we found a significant, but small, effect where characters in a guild have a longer leveling time than characters not in a guild". (http://blogs.parc.com/playon/archives/2005/07/guild_affiliati_1.html)

I'm a devoted *WoW* player and cooperation and chatting are my favorite parts of the game, so I would have loved it if the results were different, i.e. that being in a guild would reward the individual directly by yielding faster level advancement. Although this isn't the case, it is my opinion that being in a guild is well worth the sacrifice, because it rewards you with companionship,

wider horizons, and the joys of giving and receiving.

-Aviv Hurvitz

As a result of this letter, we wrote Nick Yee in an effort to clear up the matter. In addition to clarifying a graph, he commented on the findings of the study:

"Characters who solo level faster. The biggest caveat in interpreting this data, though, is to keep in mind that players who solo are probably different from players who love to group in more than just that aspect - that they prefer to solo for a set of reasons etc. In other words, we're looking more at a difference between achievement vs. socialization rather than a direct difference between grouping and soloing."

Mark Wallace wishes, also, to speak to the discrepancy found between his article and the study:

I'm sorry to see I misinterpreted PlayOn's statistics. But although their data doesn't support my thesis, I continue to see guilds and corps as beneficial for new immigrants to virtual

lands. I value my own time in MMOGs by how much fun I have in them and how compelling a story I can create there. So, even if I do level more slowly in a guild, I'm happy to trade a few hours of playtime for a richer experience.

-Mark Wallace

To the Editor: Matthew Hector's piece in this most recent issue was a reasonable case against this wave of legislative fervor aimed at games. Outside of the futility of arguing reasonably and rationally against any issue which can be framed in "what about the children?" terms, Mr. Hector appears to have forgotten the lesson of the Supreme Court's disastrous decision in *Gonzales v. Raich*. If growing medical marijuana on private property for local use affects interstate commerce - and can then be acted upon via the Controlled Substances Act - then surely selling video games falls under federal jurisdiction as well.

The Commerce Clause is now much like "what about the children?" - it applies to anything and everything, and is difficult to counter. That political concerns are

geared against liberty and adult behavior in our current cultural climate is about as remarkable as water being wet; it's a shame, however, that it takes personal attacks on hobbies for game players (as a whole) to notice this trend, as it has been applied many times in many places against a whole host of rights and liberties for far longer than most of us have been alive.

-Michael O'Connor

To the Editor: I'd like to offer a counter point to Mr. Nolan's view that the article on The Syndicate in issue 10 was "slightly misleading."

The real core of the matter is what is meant by "successful," as a definition of success is necessary to determine whether claims made are misleading or not. The definition of success really is one of personal choice. There are no defined standards of success in the online gaming world. Some people measure success by specific game related goals.

Some measure success by the size of their guild. We feel that we are successful for a number of reasons that

matter to us. Some of those measures of success, that matter to us, include:

Our Yearly Conferences: For the past four years we have been holding yearly guild conferences, each one larger than the previous, with this year's reaching over 130 people.

Our Internal Unity: Despite being a huge guild, we are extremely close and, over the years, have grown into a group with very nearly no infighting, no backstabbing and no internal quarrels. Our early days, where we were fleshing out our rules, policies and direction, things were certainly more dynamic but, for many years, we have had smooth sailing. More than half the guild has been with us 4 or more years.

Longevity: With hundreds of guilds rising and falling each day in the online world, and 99% of all guilds failing before they reach even the two or three year mark, being around 10 years is an important success factor, for us.

Our Developer and Community Relationships: We sit on many of the developer's player council boards. We do chats, roundtables and feedback



sessions with them online and at our conferences. We regularly participate in internal alpha/beta tests. We are proud of our relationships and we seek to continue to use them to make online gaming better for all gamers.

Certainly everyone has and is entitled to an opinion. One person's success may not be the measure of another's. In nearly 10 years of existence, we have had our challenges and made our share of mistakes. Yet, here we are, stronger for overcoming those challenges, and we are committed to each other and the path we are on. We are extremely proud of our accomplishments with every expectation of an even brighter future.

-Sean Stalzer

Regarding "The Coward:"

To the Editor: Couldn't resist throwing in a bit of Bush bashing? I'm sick of loony liberals who have to insert their Bush hatred into everything they write.

How is anyone suppose to take the rest of the piece seriously once they realize the author is a moonbat?

-Robert Davis

To the Editor: I found Mark Wallace's article "We the Avatars" pretty well covered the bases in terms of what games provide what level of interactive economies. However, I do feel *Star Wars Galaxies* should have gotten a mention.

From the moment a new player enters the game, they are part of the economy. Every resource they gather is used in every weapon, armor, furniture and building created. While it's no *Second Life*, since everything a player can build is coded-into the game by SOE, it's far more advanced in what players can opt to do.

And that "opt" is the most important feature. *SWG* is by no means perfect. It comes with a huge array of longstanding bugs and has gone through a number of overhauls. However, it also is the broadest experience an MMOG fan can get. From PvE to PvP to running a semi-real business with partners, contracts, and employees, to dabbling, you have the freedom to live a virtual lifestyle most other games don't have.

While it's fun to watch the emergence of real money trading (RMT) and project the eventual establishment of codified

social constructs, we shan't forget there are some games designed as games simply to explore the depths of social interaction and what players would do in a near-boundless environment with no accountability.

RMTing, and à la carte financial relationships between developers and players changes that immersion. Players are no longer motivated by the desire to Escape. Now they need to worry about the finances for doing so.

Sad in a way, something lost.

-Darniaq

A Conversation with Chris Crawford

by Max Steele

The man known as the Dean of American Game Design toils alone, unfunded and underappreciated, in a forest in Oregon. He has renounced games; or perhaps, one might say, games have renounced him.

Who is Chris Crawford, and why does he toil alone?

Is he Don Quixote, a dreamer slaying dragons that exist only in his own imagination? Is he Albert Einstein, an unsurpassed genius fruitlessly spending his winter years chasing an impossible, grand theory while his peers reap high praise for incremental improvements in proven fields? Or is he Miyamoto Musashi, a peerless master soon to emerge from the wilderness of his isolation with brilliant insights into his craft?

I've hunted him down to find out.

A Portrait of the Designer as a Young Man

I didn't know where to start, so I started at the beginning and asked Crawford about his life before games. He didn't say much.

"I studied physics, got my masters in physics, and then I taught physics for two years. Then I moved back to California and had a teaching job that was kind of crazy. I did high school assemblies on the Energy Crisis." He was quick to add that "I was working on games pretty hard, even then. I built my first computer game back in 1976 on an IBM 1120."

Crawford joined Atari in 1979, where he created two educational simulation games, Energy Czar and Scram, for the Atari Home Computer System, before he was promoted to manage programmer training. In his spare time, he created Eastern Front (1941), which went on to become his first best-seller.

Eastern Front (1941) was one of Crawford's most noteworthy creations so I decided to press him for details.

"Eastern Front was a creative implementation of an obvious idea. 'Let's do a good wargame on a computer!' he said. "Pulling it off involved an awful lot of creativity, but it required tactical creativity as opposed to strategic creativity."

I was puzzled by what he meant. Crawford has a reputation for being outspoken, but it's a cryptic sort of outspokenness, profound to the point of incomprehensibility. Talking to him can be like reading A Brief History of Time at 120 words a minute. You always feel like you're missing something.

"Tactical creativity is implementation creativity. How do we build a good map? How do we move units around? How do

we build a good AI system? You already know where you are going and you are just figuring out how to get there."

"So would you say in today's game industry we have a lot of tactical creativity and less strategic creativity?" I asked.

"Nowadays the stuff we call creative is tiny, tiny stuff. It's hard to even call it creative at all. Technically, yes, I see a lot of creativity. But I see almost no design creativity in the stuff that's coming out there."

I decided we should review the rest of his work before we moved into philosophy. We got back to the details. After Eastern Front, Crawford created Legionnaire, Gossip, and Excalibur, and wrote The Art of Computer Game Design, the first of his many books. His reasons for the book were intensely introspective.

"I wrote Art of Computer Game Design really as a self-education exercise. The best way to figure something out is to write a book. You don't realize how ignorant you are until you try to write it down," he explained. "The book took me

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a year to write and there isn't that much prose in it, and that's because it took me so much time to sort things out."

The intellectual self-development paid off, as Crawford's following game, Balance of Power, was his most successful. It sold 250,000 units in 1984 – a staggering number for the time, more so given it was in the Dark Age after Atari had imploded and before Nintendo came onto the scene.

In 1987, Crawford founded the Game Developers Conference, which he would chair for the next seven years. He also created Trust & Betrayal: The Legacy of Siboot. "It's the game of which I'm most proud," he said. "Trust & Betrayal went further beyond games than anything else I had done. It had major innovations. If we think of an innovation or creativity as a leap, then Eastern Front had some good sized jumps, Balance of Power some very good sized jumps, and Trust

& Betrayal had a bunch of truly mighty leaps. It was completely alien."

Alien indeed. Trust & Betrayal put the player in the role of an alien acolyte competing against six computer-controlled acolytes of other species for the title of Shepherd. Each of the computer-controlled competitors had a distinct personality and the core of the gameplay was figuring out which ones to ally with and which to oppose. It was a

pioneering attempt to put real characters into computer games, relying on artificial personality and language parsing solutions that were innovative or clumsy. No one had ever made a game like it before, nor since.

It sold only about 5,000 copies.

Trust & Betrayal was the beginning of the end of Crawford's pursuit of computer game design. In the eight years prior he

Q&A with Chris Crawford

Q: Where are you from?

A: I was born in Houston, Texas. I spent about ten years there. We moved when I was eleven to California. I lived there til I was 21, went to grad school in Missouri, taught for two years in Nebraska, then returned to California. I came to Oregon about nine years ago.

Q: How old are you?

A: I'm 55. That makes me one of the oldest people in the business.

Q: Do you have a family?

A: A wife, but no children.

Q: Favorite game to play?

A: Well, I don't play games that much anymore. They're... boring. I'll occasionally play solitaire to kill five minutes.

Q: Last movie went to see?

A: That would be Star Wars Episode III.

Q: Alcoholic beverage of choice?

A: None.

Q: Favorite flavor of ice cream?

A: Chocolate.

Q: Vacation?

A: I don't vacation. I live in a forest. When I want to refresh myself I go out in the forest and chop wood and thin thicket and so forth.

Q: Person You Most Respect in the Industry?

A: Gordon Walton.

had designed twelve games. In the next four, he did just four, and two of them were sequels (Balance of Power II and Patton Strikes Back). The other two were global simulations, both released in 1990: Guns & Butter and Balance of the Planet.

When I asked Crawford about Balance of the Planet all he said was "it was good, but it was not one of my best." A few years ago, he was not so circumspect. In a 1997 essay, Crawford spoke of his reaction to the release of Balance of the Planet:

I was so proud of that design! ...I wanted to create a game that honestly addressed environmental policy problems, something to show just how powerfully a computer could present a complex issue. I did just that... Yet when I released it to the world, the reaction of industry, press, and consumers was unenthusiastic. Perhaps their reaction is best summarized by a review of Balance of the Planet appearing in Computer Gaming World. The reviewer noted that 'it is the closest thing to art to be sold as computer entertainment...but it is just not fun...if the game is not fun, it

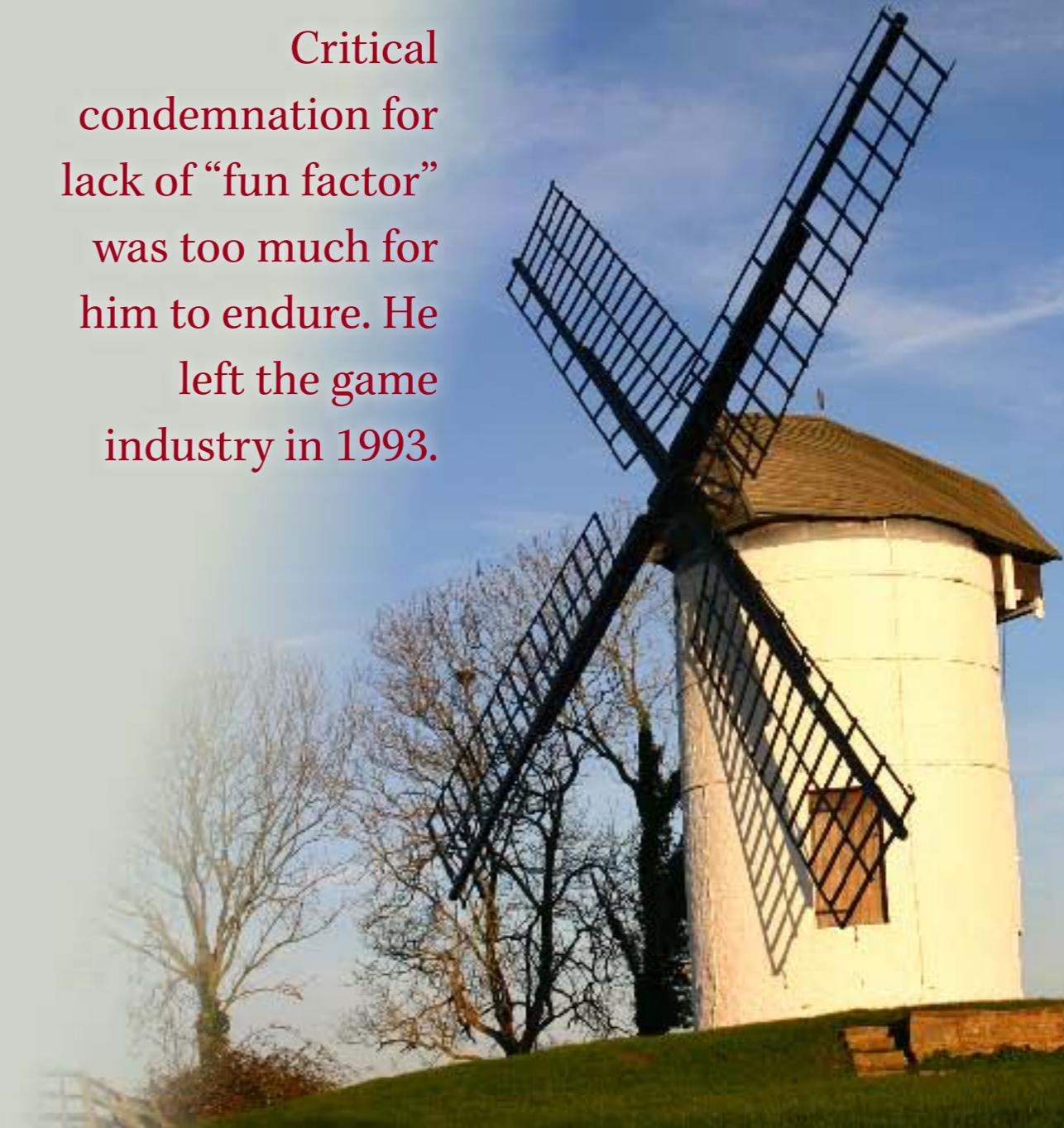
simply wouldn't be right to endorse it...' Here we have an acknowledgement that Balance of the Planet is some kind of art, yet the review refuses to endorse it because it isn't fun! ... perhaps our reviewer would react to Beethoven's Ninth Symphony like this: "Gosh, Mr. Beethoven, your symphony made my heart soar in awe at the majesty of the universe, but you know, it's just not fun. We need some tunes we can dance to, or catchy jingles we can snap our fingers to."

Ulysses

Crawford, I believe, could have endured commercial failure for his artistic work, if he had received critical acclaim as a visionary. But critical condemnation for lack of "fun factor" was too much for him to endure. He left the game industry in 1993, beginning a decade-long odyssey of false starts and fresh ideas that continues to this day.

Crawford announced his departure in a famously histrionic lecture known as the Dragon Speech. "It was the greatest lecture I've ever given in my life," Crawford told me. "It talked about my pursuit of games as an art form, and how I had seen the industry moving

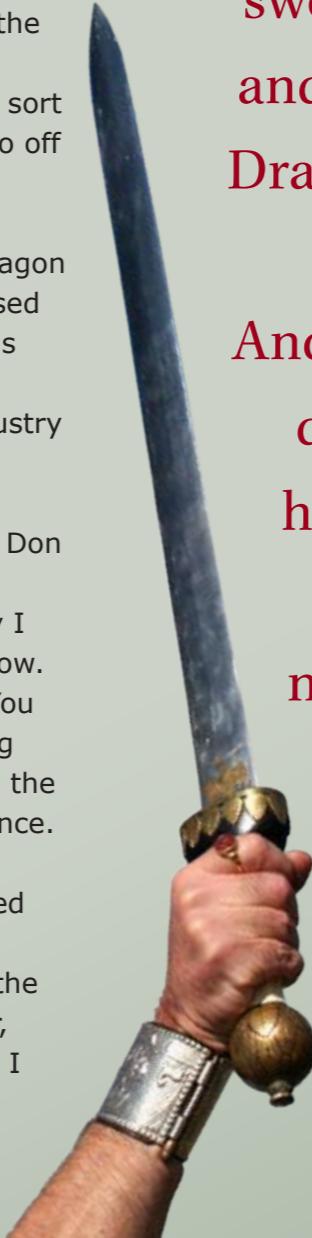
Critical condemnation for lack of "fun factor" was too much for him to endure. He left the game industry in 1993.



away from that dream in the pursuit of money. It had completely discarded any pretense of doing anything worthwhile. It was just pure money-grubbing of the most short-sighted kind. And the industry had no real future with that sort of an attitude. So I decided to just go off and do my own thing."

I asked him why it was called the Dragon Speech. "Throughout the lecture I used the rhetorical device of the Dragon as the artistic ideal, with me as Don Quixote – the fool who defies all industry logic and imposes his own reality."

"I concluded the lecture speaking as Don Quixote. 'All right, I am leaving the industry. And by leaving the industry I can see the Dragon. I can see him now. Yes, yes, you frighten me, Dragon. You hurt me! I can feel your claws ripping through my soul.' I almost screamed the words out. It really scared the audience. I pulled out my sword—a real, leaf-bladed sword—held it up, and shouted 'Come Dragon, I shall fight you! CHARGE!' And went galloping down the lecture hall, ran right out of the door, and never came back. That was how I announced my departure from the games industry."



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If Crawford's departure was larger than life, his post-departure ambitions were even larger. Crawford's goal was to create a new art form: Interactive storytelling. "I thought it would take me eighteen months, maybe two years, to put together interactive storytelling. I've been working on this for eleven, or twelve years now."

What exactly is interactive storytelling? "Games about people instead of about things," explained Crawford. "It's very difficult to understand. It's just like the problem they had with the cinema – it took them about fifteen years to figure out what cinema really is. Around the turn of the century, the thought was that cinema was like a play with the camera sitting where the audience sits. That's where we are with interactive storytelling – people can't conceive of it."

The closest anyone has come, said Crawford, is an interactive story called *Façade*, by Michael Mateas and Andrew Stern. *Façade* has been broadly praised by mainstream commentators such as the New York Times, which called it "the future of video games," as well as by Crawford, who called it "without a doubt,

the best actual working interactive story world yet created."

Crawford wouldn't be Crawford without at least a few criticisms. "*Façade* is the only genuine interactive story-telling thingamob out there, but it only demonstrates just how difficult the problem is. The story has only three characters, takes place on a single stage, has a limited repertoire of behaviors... It's still very good – And it works, which I can't claim the Erasmustron does. But they defined The Problem more narrowly."

The Erasmustron is Crawford's own interactive storytelling technology. And The Problem is the richness of human social interaction.

"Social interaction can't be built in incrementally," he explained. "Take romance. You can't just permit a gesture called Kiss and expect to get some romance in your game. Because romance involves a hell of a lot more than just kissing, it's a huge array of behaviors. Real social interaction is one giant step that has to be taken at once. You can't approach it a tiny step at a time."

Crawford, in other words, seeks to create a platform that encompasses all real human interaction in a computer environment. "I want to bring the whole set of human behaviors in at once, complete in a mathematical sense, covering all dramatically important activities. And the set must be closed, not open ended."

I asked for more details, and Crawford really started talking. He was theorizing at Faster Than Light speeds, and my note-taking went from inadequate to moot.

"My first solution with Erasmatron was inadequate. I asked too much of storybuilders. The solution I have now is to create a language, 'Deikto.' It's a small language that has only around a thousand words, it's very skeletal. But it permits you to do anything, describe any human behavior."

We were looking at samples of Deikto code for a bit when I suddenly realized I'd been interviewing Crawford for almost two hours. I decided to press him for a self-evaluation: "You remind me of

Albert Einstein, post-relativity. Have you, like Albert, lost your way?"

Crawford thought for a moment. "I think it's a fair comparison, me to Einstein, post-relativity theory. I am searching for a grand, unified theory – a grand wonderful solution to all of our problems, and I have not produced an answer yet. The difference is that Einstein really was groping the entire time. He never showed a major step forward. Whereas I am much more confident that Erasmatron will solve the problems. And Mateas and Stern have published a tiny version of Unified Field Theory – so we know it can be done. But it's weird and immensely difficult. I may not have the strength to pull it off, but I retain great confidence in the likelihood of success."

It is the peculiar tragedy of genius that the greatest minds of any generation find themselves drawn to challenges that are beyond the limits of their era. Tesla invented the radio and the alternating current before embarking on a fruitless quest for broadcast power. Einstein gave us the special and general theories of relativity before turning his attention to

the unified field theory that eluded him to his death. It is quite possible that Chris Crawford, perhaps the most gifted designer of his generation, is destined for a similar fate.

But I actually think not. When Crawford emerges from the wilderness of his isolation, like Musashi with the Book of Five Rings, count me as unsurprised. 

Max Steele is an enigma wrapped inside a riddle. When not actively being mysterious, he passes his time manipulating time and space to fit his plans for world domination.

"I think it's a fair comparison, me to Einstein, post-relativity theory. I am searching for a grand, unified theory – a grand wonderful solution to all of our problems, and I have not produced an answer yet."

The Back O' The Arcade

by Spanner

Traditionally, in England, an arcade was the kind of place where delinquents could get out of their council flats for a few hours a day (well, 16 to 20 hours) without leaving their beloved TV drug too far behind.

There were two distinct flavors of arcade. The first of these were large, well-funded, noisy, neon-soaked temples to the Japanese God of Joysticks and Buttons, with all the latest titles in tight regiment and brand spanking new uniforms (or cabinets, anyway). These magnificent establishments generated their light and thunder at the epitome of the British working-class holiday locations; sea front resorts, such as Blackpool and Scarborough. Families were welcomed, the staff in the change booths were only mildly belligerent, and a five pound note would buy you a ten minute digital fix. Regrettably, the average English joystick junkie only saw these sea front retreats once or twice a year; nowhere near enough for a dedicated, addicted player.

The mid-week alternative to Blackpool's Central Pier was the seedy, dank, back-alley-hole-of-a-crime-den that could be found in any town center in England boasting an unemployment figure in excess of 75,000 (which, since the late 70s, is a good 85% of the country). Here you could find last years machines; beaten and abused, retired from the glory of the Golden Mile to live out their lives in a decadent, smoke-filled lair.





"Second Life is an extraordinary alternative world where you can do anything you want...The only limits to the ways characters can interact are the player's imaginations and a Utopian code..."

— London Times 4.16.05

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JOIN NOW!



...despite the sticky floors and weeping walls, England's back alley arcades were a thing of horrid beauty.

When school kids bunked off for the afternoon, this is where they would go. And quite rightly, too, because despite the sticky floors and weeping walls, England's back alley arcades were a thing of horrid beauty. Here you could find the games that were made by the smaller, less successful publishers - who were nothing but a lonely arrow head frog in Nintendo's vast coin-operated jungle - but they made games that were **meant** to be played. These were also the machines that Uncle Ronnie in the downtown Yorkshire ghettos could afford to buy, and we could afford to play; the lowly, devoted, arcade creepers. We had very little money, but what we had, we shared with the iniquitous operator.

Every so often, a new machine would be brought to this digital knacker's yard and placed in the doorway to entice young urchins and their 10p pieces. At the back of the room, however, would be the old faithful campaigners – that constantly and reliably took money, so were never

replaced - where only local yokels and the bravest of the stupid would venture. Their cabinets were crumbling, the coin return buttons didn't work and the joysticks were, quite literally, sticky, but these were the machines we visited more often than our own grandparents, spending not only pocket money with them, but heart felt, quality time.

There was no competition in the home market that could compare to a dedicated arcade game. What did we have at home? Most of us who would frequent Alassio's Café and Arcade (**the** most dangerous, sordid hole in a brick wall before it "burnt down"[sic]) at best worked on a kind of hand-me-down system. When the Spectrum was released, we could afford the Atari 2600; when the Amiga was released, we could afford the Spectrum. But it was only in recent years that an "arcade perfect" home edition of *Double Dragon* appeared, so what else could we do? We **had** to go to these places.

There were kids in these arcades whose socks were a substantial part of their shoe leather and had their hair cut by their sister with a knife and fork, but give them the price of a single credit and they became rich men and kings alike. They were revered among their people for their prowess at making that single coin last longer than their melancholy trek home in the rain.

When I see a video game show on the TV, populated by affluent, sharply dressed 20-somethings talking their insipid talk while walking a 30 second walk on some photo-realistic 3-D football simulator, I remember those down and out 10-year-olds who stood on a milk crate to see the screen as they thwarted the final boss on *R-Type* with cramping knuckles and aching fingers. These were **real** video gamers, who played because of a need to take their minds out of a bleak reality, where the hostile space of the Bydo Empire or the back streets of Metro City was more of a home than their own bedroom.

And harsh as these arcades were, it was a place where they could go to be with their own kind, be it Shinobi or little Tim Green from Collier Street, banding

together for the single most important reason that arcades existed across the world (the same reason that has been forgotten by today's video game industry) - to have fun. Sadly, as the scene changed, there was no longer any place for these video game graveyards, and they are now a long lost, but not forgotten, piece of a single generation's childhood. A dim and murky light was extinguished, exchanged for a faint flicker of hope when the internet appeared, though it will never replace our beloved raster lit muck hole that was the back of the arcade. ■

Spanner has written articles for several publications, including Retro Gamer. He is a self-proclaimed horror junkie, with a deep appreciation for all things Romero.

**They were revered among their people
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melancholy trek home in the rain.**



Chasing Phantoms

by Joe Blancato

The internet has turned into the Wild West of a generation. Bullies and gang leaders rule with an iron fist while Good Guys try to stick together. Unfortunately, the Good Guys usually end up having to use their arsenal of bansticks liberally when trying to clean up a message board.

In addition to the struggle between Good and Evil, snake oil salesmen and evangelists roll into town and convert hundreds and thousands of followers before disappearing in the middle of the night, leaving behind bewildered good people. This is a story of one of those flashes in the pan. What happened to this flash? The answer rode off into the sunset.

Headed up by Peter Baumann, Jr., a 15-year-old wunderkind, and his father, Red Dragon Software set out to create the holy grail of MMOGs. Announced when *Ultima Online*, *EverQuest* and *Asheron's Call* began losing their luster, *Rune Conquest* promised fast-paced combat, interesting crafting and skill gain that made sense.

As the realization that even preliminary art hadn't yet been created, discussion began flying, and testers started yelling "scam."

Back in the dark ages of MMOG development, the concept of a two man team building the foundation of a game engine, along with designing the aesthetic and promoting the game, was eminently more believable. Even *EQ*'s team was relatively small by today's standards, and *Meridian 59*'s development team was just a handful of talented guys working in cramped quarters. Besides, the Baumanns never planned on going it alone; as soon as they acquired more funding, they'd hire an entire development team. But they planned on getting funded in an avant garde manner: players could pay \$50 to guarantee entrance to an online beta, as well as receive special God powers once the game went live.

Money from hopefuls poured in. Here it was, a chance to be a part of something, to have a financial stake in an idea you believed in. And hey, God powers. Red Dragon was able to play on hope and greed, and the powerful combination got

people talking, which only drew in more interested gamers. As more people grew interested, more people began wondering exactly what it was they were buying into; the scheduled public beta was fast approaching, but Red Dragon had yet to hire any new developers, aside from a web designer named Chris Anderson.

The Baumanns defended themselves by claiming one of the programmers they were planning to hire was a corporate spy from another firm, and they nixed the entire group in a fit of xenophobia. Red Dragon was in a bad spot: They were still a three man company without a game to show people, whose money they were holding.

Red Dragon disintegrated into panic. The Baumanns became extremely aggressive on their message boards, taunting members who questioned the game's development. The actual website went through turmoil, as Chris Anderson took

it down after a dispute between he and Baumann, Sr. The drama came to a head when Anderson declared he and his wife felt their lives were threatened by Baumann. Anderson later retracted his statement and transferred ownership of the website and its content to Baumann, but the episode shook many of the beta testers' resolves.

In a bid to keep people interested, Red Dragon finally released preliminary screen shots, a tidbit of the great things to come from a company who finally overcame their growing pains. Unfortunately, the screen shots weren't even theirs. They were stock footage from developers of a middleware engine used to promote their software.

As the realization that even preliminary art hadn't yet been created, discussion began flying, and testers started yelling "scam." Some asked for refunds on their investment, which took weeks to arrive. Others remained hopeful, and stayed



Welcome.



Probably the best beer in the world.

Despite the cloud of apparent cynicism, gamers do enjoy liking stuff.

with the game until it fizzled away, never to be heard from again. By the time screen shots actually eked their way out of Red Dragon Studios, anyone with an outside view could easily say the game wasn't going to materialize.

The hiring episode was what piqued my attention. Call it a love of corporate espionage, or perhaps I'm just some sort of drama vampire, but I had to jump into the *Rune Conquest* fray, just to see what made these fanatics tick. When I got there, it was just a message board full of upbeat people who wanted desperately to enjoy something. But things became so haywire by the end, the only people who remained were the ones who were there at the beginning.

What kept people there? To hear them talk, it was the emotional investment. Try spending months or years believing in something, only to resolve yourself to the fact the dream isn't coming true. Some people can't handle the strain, and prefer to continue on, eventually turning into evangelists for their ideal. But it's not a flaw, it's just a byproduct of hope.

Despite the cloud of apparent cynicism, gamers do enjoy liking stuff. Questing after a comfortable niche can catapult anyone into psychoville, be it the manic high point that is the super fan, or the overly aggressive burnout who remembers the last time he reached out for something, but drew back a bloody stump - and won't let anyone forget about it.

It's easy to criticize with a bird's eye view. Everyone has been a fanatic at some point or another. They've also been the abused dog too afraid to come out from under the porch. Find someone who hasn't, and you'll find someone who can't embrace their own humanity. There's no sense resisting the urge to believe; it's eventually going to get you. I only hope you don't wind up chasing a phantom. ■

Joe Blancato is a Contributing Editor for The Escapist Magazine, in addition to being the Founder of waterthread.org.

NEWS BITS

Age of Empires III Goes Gold

The second sequel to the smash hit Age of Empires series has reached gold status, with a stated release date of October 18. Original Age of Empires developers Ensemble Studios, are again the brains behind the game's production, a feat that's becoming rare as large publishers shuffle studios around internally. Age of Empires III will retail for \$49.99.

SquareEnix Purchases Taito

SquareEnix initiated a friendly takeover of Taito, acquiring 93.7% of the company's stock for roughly \$565 million. Taito's recent focus has been on the mobile games market; they've produced numerous arcade classics for cell phones on multiple carriers, as well as titles for the Nokia N-Gage.

Guild Wars Reaches 1 Million Subscribers; EVE Online, 70,000

ArenaNet's Guild Wars has reached the 1 million mark, meaning 1 million game accounts have been created utilizing the game's free online play. While not traditionally an MMOG, Guild Wars' profit strategy, which provides free online play with the assumption that players will purchase expansions periodically, may indeed prove viable if they maintain a high conversion rate with the debut of their first expansion.

Additionally, Icelandic developers CCP announced EVE Online has 70,000 subscribers, and has surpassed a concurrent user total of 15,000. EVE's growth in the era of World of Warcraft may suggest that WoW isn't only "stealing" subscribers from other games, but also is introducing first time MMOG players to other facets within the industry.

Casual Friday

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Lost Legends

by Kyle Orland

Mario. Zelda. Donkey Kong. The holy trinity of Nintendo franchises has appeared in about a billion games that have sold a gazillion combined copies worldwide. Add in the more-recently sainted *Pokémon* series, and you've got the world's oldest and possibly most widely-accepted, thriving videogame religion.

Dig deeper into the Nintendo catalog and you'll find ... well, actually, you'll find even more franchises. *Kirby. Star Fox. Metroid. F-Zero.* They're not quite household names, but they're all well-known and well-loved by the Nintendo faithful.

But dig even deeper past the main franchises and you get ... heck, you get spin-off franchises. The *Mario Tennis, Golf, Kart* and *Party* series have nearly 20 games between them, with more coming. Even the spin-offs have spin-offs - the *Wario Land* series has spawned four *Wario Ware* games so far, with more no doubt coming.

In an industry obsessed with extracting every last penny from any proven franchise, Nintendo is the undisputed king. Anything even remotely successful will eventually be repackaged, remarkedeted and resold back to a new generation of gamers at a premium price. They're like Disney, but without the theme parks (at least not yet).

But amid all these unmitigated franchise successes, there are some false starts. Nintendo's history is littered with the abandoned-but-not-forgotten corpses of partially aborted franchises - the underappreciated classics that got one or two games and then faded into the background of our collective gaming memories for decades. Like, do you remember that game with the bikes where you could do all sorts of crazy jumps and stuff? Or the one with those weird bird things on balloons? Man, they should **totally** make some new versions of those.

So, why do some series become pillars of Nintendo's success, while some become trivia? Why has Mario appeared in over a hundred games while the guys from *Excitebike* and *Balloon Fight* can barely manage two apiece?

Bad timing is sometimes to blame. *Star Tropics* came out in 1990, when any self-respecting NES owner was too busy playing *Super Mario Bros. 3* to pay attention to a quirky, Zelda-style action-

adventure. A sequel, *Zoda's Revenge*, came out in 1994, when most gamers had put away their NES in favor of the next generation of 16-bit systems. After less-than-stellar sales for the sequel, Nintendo wasn't eager to make another follow-up.

Some are just too weird for an American audience. *EarthBound*, a satirical RPG released in the heyday of the SNES, eschewed traditional dragons and heroic knights for talking monkeys and a 13-year-old with a baseball bat. The game achieved great success in Japan and has a cult status among English speakers, but failed to capture the attention of a larger American audience. "*EarthBound* is the *Rocky Horror Picture Show* of role-playing games: underhanded, subversive, witty and strange," says Casey Toner, a fan of the game who frequents *EarthBound* fan site Starmen.net.

Some failed due to ineffective marketing. *EarthBound* was promoted with an odd scratch-and-sniff ad that smelled like

So, why do some series become pillars of Nintendo's success, while some become trivia?





various offensive odors (slogan: "this game stinks"). The game itself came in an oversized box that included a strategy guide, which made it an unlikely fit in busy retail displays.

Star Tropics graced the cover of Nintendo Power issues 21 and 22, as the magazine spread a 33-page strategy guide over two issues. Not bad, but *Super Mario Bros. 3* got its own feature-length advertising movie. Sometimes it's hard to compete with yourself.

Some potential franchises fall by the wayside because of simple neglect from the publisher. *Punch-Out* was one of Nintendo's biggest hits for the fledgling NES and had a well-received sequel on the SNES, but has sat dormant for 11 years since. "I think that without Nintendo pushing the series or having any new ideas for a new *Punch-Out* game, it becomes forgotten," says Frederick Shafer, who manages a *Punch-Out* fan site (http://members.tripod.com/master_phred/punchout/) and created a popular hacked version of the game.

But this doesn't mean *Punch-Out* is down for the count. Other Nintendo series

have suffered through long droughts only to be revived years later, transformed by the big N into marketing powerhouses.

The *F-Zero* series enjoyed a several year hiatus between the original SNES edition and the Nintendo 64 sequel. Today, the series has its own cartoon on Fox and three new versions on the Game Boy Advance. And there were eight long years between the SNES' *Super Metroid* and GameCube's *Metroid Prime*. Since then, there have been four new *Metroid* games in as many years, and spin-off *Metroid Pinball* is planned for the Nintendo DS.

"Nintendo knew they had this successful franchise sitting around, but they probably just lacked the team to make it," says Devin Monnens, a contributor to Metroid fansite *Metroid Database* (<http://www.classicgaming.com/mdb/>). "Nintendo [has a] desire to push their franchises and try to reach as many kinds of players as possible and *Metroid* is such a powerful series to help do that."

So what can a fan do to let Nintendo know where to direct their precious resources? An internet petition is always

a first step. "I think the fan support for *Kid Icarus* is a silent power," says Wesley Grogan, a *Kid Icarus* fan who has started an online petition (<http://www.petitiononline.com/nint1459/petition.html>) to get another sequel to the NES classic (*Kid Icarus: Of Myths and Monsters*, was released for the Game Boy in 1991). Over 300 signatures have been added so far, with pleas like "I LOVE KID ICARUS GAME!" and "If done correctly, this could be bigger than *Zelda*."

"*Kid Icarus* was one of the defining games for the Nintendo Entertainment System, even if it wasn't recognized as such at the time," Grogan says. "In many ways, [it] spoke to a fairly refined gamer that was content to wait for the next game in the series to come out. It took us over seventeen years to realize that this might not actually happen. Now, though, I think the sleeping giants are beginning to awaken."

Even if you can't get the groundswell of popular support for that sequel, there's always the chance your favorite classic will be catapulted to popularity by a cameo appearance. Marth and Roy's appearance in *Super Smash Bros. Melee*

...all your favorite forgotten Nintendo games might soon be a legal download away.

likely cleared the way for the two domestic *Fire Emblem* releases for the Game Boy Advance.

Or the cameo might do next to nothing. "Most people can't identify Ness from a flying basket of grapes," Toner says of the *EarthBound* character's appearance in the *Super Smash Bros.* games. Still, consider how many people had even heard of *Ice Climber* before *Super Smash Bros. Melee*. Most gamers now at least know the name, even if they're not exactly clamoring for a sequel.

If a sequel or cameo isn't possible, you can always hope that a re-release will generate some support. With the Nintendo Revolution's planned virtual console allowing backwards compatibility across generations, all your favorite forgotten Nintendo games might soon be a legal download away. And once gamers get tired of replaying *Super Mario Bros. 3*, it's possible they'll turn their attention to some of those neglected originals.

But if and when you do get that re-release, be prepared for a damaging hit to your nostalgia-laced memories. When *Clu Clu Land* was released for the Game Boy Advance under the NES Classic label, many thought Nintendo was already scraping the bottom of its historic barrel. "Different? Yes. Classic? Debatable. Fun? More like clunky and frustrating," quipped the IGN review (<http://gameboy.ign.com/articles/521/521091p1.html>).

This brings up the distinct possibility - which fans might be loathe to entertain - that some of these games were forgotten because they just weren't that good. Or at least not as good as the rest of Nintendo's catalog. "*Kid Icarus* probably didn't make it because of the design: linear levels (either horizontal or vertical) followed by a *Zelda*-like dungeon," Metroid fan Monnens said. "While there's certainly a lot that can be done with this layout, there just wasn't that mechanic of backtracking you see in the later *Mario* games."

Some games that seemed great, even revolutionary, when they first came out might not seem as fresh in light of twenty years of progress. Shafer thinks

classics like *Punch-Out* might be hard-pressed to get any attention in today's marketplace. "With the newer and picky gamers and game reviewers out there, you would have to push the 3D elements, graphics, sound, music, play control, and fun factor to please all of them."

And why should Nintendo bother with all of that, when they can slap *Mario*'s face onto a new version of *Dance Dance Revolution* and sell a million copies without breaking a sweat? There will always be Nintendo faithful around, ready to snap up the latest sacred offerings of the holy trinity. As long as this doesn't change, it seems unlikely that Nintendo will spend the time and energy necessary to revive that many old, forgotten series.

But man, wouldn't you love to see a new version of that flying game? With the parachute jumping and rings and stuff? That game was **awesome.** 

Kyle Orland is a videogame freelancer. He writes about the world of videogame journalism on his weblog, *Video Game Media Watch*.

Stories From The Back O' The Arcade

by Spanner

No one needs an in depth retrospective of *Mario Bros.*, *Mortal Kombat* or *Street Fighter II*. Even if you were part of the extended 15 year expedition to the Mir space station and never played the games, chances are you've seen the movies. But there were a lot more arcade games released every year than the two or three classics that caused Japanese coin shortages, and many of these were far superior to the well remembered titles. It has taken more than a little effort to plough the depths of both the internet and my own, fragmented memory to rediscover those fantastic, unheard of games (in whose coin boxes I would store my pocket money), but here are a couple of trips down memory lane for anyone looking to discover the soul of the arcade scene.

Fire Trap - Nihon Bussan - 1986

(If you like this, you might also like: *Crazy Climber 1 & 2*, and *Rampage*.)

A vertiginous update of the 1980 classic, *Crazy Climber*, recast the ascending protagonist as a daredevil fire fighter, winging his way from window sill to drainpipe in exhilarating, finger nail wrenching drama while dowsing vicious back drafts with his trusty water pistol.

As the 3-D revolution was still having its shoes tied by its mum, *Fire Trap* was born into a time where isometrics were king. The stage is set with our fearless wall crawler hanging from a ledge at the bottom of a blazing tower block viewed from the corner, making for a clean cut isometric playing field of two walls.





The player commands each of the character's arms independently using two joysticks in an alternating action - kind of like those cross training machines that people without any hobbies use, only without the annoyance of getting fit. That said, an enthusiastic player will work up a hearty sweat traversing the treacherous building-scape as any number of hazardous impediments plummet down the side of the crumbling structure.

Cars, teapots, toilets, gravestones, flowerpots, large novelty mallets and even birds of prey all conspire to loose the valiant fireman's tenuous finger hold and send him nose-diving onto the safety of a generous crash mat. The length of the towering inferno is interspersed with panicked occupants (and their dogs) flailing from the windows, hoping the daring-doer will stop by and strap a parachute to them before dropping them from the significant loftiness of their once prestigious apartment.

The difficulty of the game is directly proportional to the diversity of the

building's flamboyant architectural designs. A straight route to the top is hindered by gaping balconies, outdoor hot tubs, neon billboards and the occasional parking space (how exactly someone reverse parks into a spot thirty stories above the ground is not detailed), all spewing forth fireballs, explosions and shrapnel.

Once at the top of the elevated conflagration, the stalwart anti-combustion technician is rewarded by a free base jump in the company of a precarious damsel who dimwittedly fled to the highest point on the building to escape the burgeoning blaze.

A terrifically gratifying and underrated jaunt that is difficult to place in any specific genre. It's unlikely you will find this beauty in its original cabinet, so I suggest you go and emulate yourself up a right tasty treat in *Fire Trap*. It's the next best thing to playing with matches.

Vigilante - Irem - 1988

(If you like this, you might also like: *Bad Dudes vs. Dragon Ninja*, *Strider* and *The Ninja Warriors*.)

"The law failed, but the vigilante prevailed!"

Now if that isn't a fitting social commentary that is as true today as it was in 1988, I'll beat up my landlord. This is the cheesy rhyme used to congratulate the fearless vigilante with enough money to make it to the end of Irem's superlative update to their dreadful *Kung Fu* game of four years previous.

"The police cannot stop the street gangs..." is the set up line for a few quid's worth of carnage, "take the law into your own hands!" After such eloquent counsel, who could refuse?

"Madonna has been kidnapped." I wouldn't like to say if it's that Madonna, but judging by her blonde ringlets and "school girl" gingham get-up, I'd say it probably isn't (unless she's dressed like that as part of a role-playing fetish, in which case, way-hey!). A gang known as the Skinheads have snatched a kung fu

warrior's (material) girlfriend for no obvious reason other than incurring his expert wrath. The antagonists of this violent street theatre are that most prevalent of beat 'em up misanthropes, the punks.

Graphics are crisp, cartoony and unambiguous, with detailed backdrops and sparse but artistic sprites, while the music is a bass driven metronome that thumps along in harmony with fists and feet. Sound effects worthy of any Hong Kong movie are expertly used, allowing the player to feel every bone crunching assault. Not exactly replete with moves, the player is awarded naught but a solid punch and a throat mashing kick, both of which can be used while jumping or crouching. Robust nunchaku can also be found audaciously abandoned on the pavement for your miscreant thrashing pleasures.

Enemies are fairly standard across the five modish levels, many of whom are likewise armed with rudimentary weaponry available now from B&Q. Iron bars and chains are unexpectedly (but effectively, as any inner city police officer will tell you) whipped across our hero's kneecaps, while others push combat

knives in his ribs or take careful aim before busting a cap in his dome.

I will not pretend there is any brain to this two dimensional "kick and punch-a-thon;" it is just one of those games that unerringly succeeds through its basic simplicity and raw, shameless entertainment value.

Although *Vigilante* may lie rotting and ignored at the bottom of the retro gaming canal while we "ooo" and "ahhh" over beautifully restored *Galaxian* cabinets, it is exactly this kind of bare bones, well-groomed gamer's game that kept the industry alive during the insipid 1980s. In the true spirit of this perfection in video game brutality, if you don't agree, I'll see you on the street! □

Spanner has written articles for several publications, including Retro Gamer. He is a self-proclaimed horror junkie, with a deep appreciation for all things Romero.



MEET THE TEAM

Each week we ask a question of our staff and featured writers to learn a little bit about them and gain some insight into where they are coming from. This week's question is:

"Where do you go when you don't want to be found?"

Max Steele, "A Conversation with Chris Crawford"

I visit my friend, Chris. He lives in a freaking forest.

Spanner, "The Back o' the Arcade"

Peter Sarstedt asked: "Where do you go to my lovely, when you're alone in your head". What better place is there but burrowing deep into your own subconscious to spend a few hours in the company of personal demons? Sure, it lends ammunition to your psychiatrist, but between us, I think he's a figment of my imagination anyway.

Joe Blancato, Contributing Editor

"You want to go where people know, People are all the same; You want to go where everybody knows your name." Actually, I usually hop into the car and drive on the straightest road I can find, going as fast as six cylinders can drag me. Max Steele will be disappointed, though; I drive a Japanese car.

Kyle Orland, "Lost Legends"

Editor's Note: Mr. Orland did not want to be found.

JR Sutich, Contributing Editor

I go to the top of a mountain in Central Montana. I just hope I don't get lost one of these times, and end up being the guy most in need of being found.

Julianne Greer, Executive Editor

I go to my Super Seekrit Volcano Base. No, I'm not telling you where it is. Then you will find all of my plans for Total World Domination.

